

VZCZCXRO1479

PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHAK #0648/01 0801533

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 211533Z MAR 07

FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1409

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC//J-3/J-5// PRIORITY

RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEUITH/TLO ANKARA TU PRIORITY

RUEHAK/USDAO ANKARA TU PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ANKARA 000648

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL ECON TU

SUBJECT: THE TRUTH BEHIND THE AKP'S "SECRET ISLAMIC AGENDA"

REF: A. ANKARA 0629

1B. ANKARA 0610

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner for reasons 1.4(b),
(d)

11. (C) Summary. Ever since its victory in the 2002 general elections, rumours and suspicion have swirled around the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) "secret" Islamist agenda. After more than four years in power, some doubters are relieved to find an AKP that appears conservative, Western- as well as Islam-oriented, reform minded and democratic. Others remain convinced that AKP is determined to impose Sharia law in Turkey and undermine the country's secular system once it gains control of the triple crown - the presidency, prime ministry and parliament - in this year's double elections. The evidence either way is circumstantial, but the issue is central to Turkey's future. Turkey's traditional secularists (including the civil service, judiciary and military), opposition parties and even ultra and neo-nationalists are resorting to increasingly desperate maneuvers, including rumour and innuendo, to counter the perceived "threat" of an AKP-dominated triumverate. Their concern is undoubtedly heightened by the realization that AKP's reform agenda threatens the established elite's traditional, top-down control. To keep the public's trust and minimize tension as Turkish society evolves, AKP leaders will need to continue to employ broad-reaching, moderate, balanced rhetoric. End summary.

The Origins of Suspicion

12. (SBU) Those looking to brand the AKP as Islamists determined to undermine the Turkish Republic point first to the AKP's religious origins and PM Erdogan's political roots.

AKP evolved from Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party (RP), an Islamist party founded in 1993. Critics focus on Erdogan, who in 1994 as Istanbul's mayor, called himself the "imam of Istanbul" and praised God that he was a servant of Sharia. Later, in 1998, Erdogan served four months of a 10-month sentence for inciting religious hatred by reading a religious poem at a rally. When the Constitutional Court outlawed the RP in 1998, Erdogan and other RP members formed the Islamic-oriented Virtue Party (FP). When FP was banned in 2001 for unconstitutional anti-secular activities, Erdogan split off from Erbakan and formed AKP with more pragmatic members willing to work within the existing political system.

Erbakan and more hardcore Islamists formed Saadet (Felicity) Party. Erdogan moderated his rhetoric, making it easier for voters to turn to AKP in the 2002 elections as an alternative to traditional parties, mired in scandals, corruption and an

economic crisis. AKP surged to power with 34 percent of the vote, one of the largest parliamentary majorities in Turkey's history.

For the Defense

¶3. (C) Those who view AKP as reform-minded and democratic are quick to cite AKP-backed reforms that strengthened freedoms and democracy. AKP legislation that reduced the military's influence in the National Security Council (MGK) and eliminated military membership in the security courts and the Board of Higher Education (YOK), among others, improved the civil-military equilibrium that had been heavily skewed toward military control. They cite as evidence of the party's western-oriented, free market approach AKP's liberal economic policies, which have stimulated the private sector, increased foreign investment, reduced inflation and stabilized the currency. AKP supporters argue that Turkey's traditional power centers (the military, judiciary, bureaucracy) feel threatened by EU-linked human rights and rule of law reforms that enhance individual freedoms. By promoting EU membership, the AKP is slowly introducing more balance into Turkey's strictly secular, statist society. Supporters maintain that Erdogan's appointment of AKP loyalists to influential positions previously held by secularists has generated resentment against the AKP, further fueled by the party's popularity. They frame attacks against the party as desperate measures by entrenched secularists who fear that further democratization will undermine their traditional control and the economic benefits they derived from state intervention in the economy.

¶4. (C) Opponents charge that AKP only pushed a reform agenda

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as far as necessary to convince the EU to begin accession talks. Even then, AKP focused on those reforms needed to dilute the military's power rather than those that might interfere with the party's Islamic agenda. They note Erdogan's support for greater freedom to express Islamic practices (such as wearing the headscarf), and point to his failure to allow Alevis, Kurds, Armenian and Greek Orthodox communities similar freedoms. Suspicious that the accession process is just a cover for the AKP's anti-secular Islamic agenda, some in the military and opposition are reconsidering the merits of EU membership. AKP officials admit reform efforts have slowed, but explain that Turkey's bureaucracy needs time to absorb and implement significant changes, such as the complete overhaul of the Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code and Punishments Law passed between 2002 and ¶2004. They also note that parliament passed in November 2006 much of another major reform package, including legislation relating to minority foundations and schools, military audits, military courts and political party funding. In some cases, parliament has had to re-approve the legislation to overcome President Sezer's veto.

Circumstantial Evidence

¶5. (C) Conspiracy theorists and concerned secularists alike build the case against AKP using persuasive but largely circumstantial evidence. Many claim that Erdogan has used AKP's parliamentary majority to weaken Turkey's secular educational, financial and judicial institutions. They warn that an AKP troika of president, PM and parliament speaker would control the appointments process, transforming Turkey's secular system into something approaching an Islamic republic. They point to AKP-sponsored changes in the strictly secular education system to allow graduates of religious high schools (imam hatip) to compete for limited university seats and qualify for government jobs. Previously, imam hatip, like other vocational school graduates, advanced to the clergy or other appropriate professions. In addition, opponents charge that AKP has undermined state regulation of private Koranic schools by lifting age limits and extending hours of attendance. As a

result, the number of Koranic schools has increased significantly, with correspondingly less government oversight.

¶6. (C) Erdogan is also frequently accused of trying to infiltrate the higher education system with Islamist-minded professors and administrators. After some university rectors resisted AKP efforts to introduce more Islam into the curriculum, AKP opponents claimed the government began a harrassment campaign. Police arrested one obstinate rector in Van twice in 2006; both times he was reinstated by court decision. Legislation creating 15 new universities gave the government authority to appoint the new rectors, rather than the usual procedure of approvals by YOK and the president. The law, pushed through over President Sezer's veto, is viewed as an end-run to allow Erdogan to select 15 new rectors of his mindset. Parliament currently is considering a proposal to establish another 17 new universities.

Green Money Seeping In

¶7. (C) While many acknowledge AKP economic successes, some doubters flag the alleged influx of "green" money from Islamic sources as proof of the real direction AKP is taking Turkey's economy. AKP opponents note that Islamist capital is hard to track and question whether it is ultimately tied to more Islamist policies. Increased investments from the UAE and a promised doubling of trade with Saudi Arabia after the Saudi King's unprecedented 2006 visit raised suspicions among some western-oriented investors. The overall trend of increased foreign investor inflows actually counters insinuations of an Islamist take-over of Turkey's financial sector, however. Investments from Islamic sources pale in comparison to total foreign inflows and do not seem to be of economic or political significance.

¶8. (C) Erdogan reputedly has manipulated the political appointments process to place Islamist bankers in key economic positions. Along with Finance Minister Kemal Unakitan - a former board member of one of Turkey's leading Islamic banks (al-Baraka) - Erdogan's appointment of seven other al-Baraka officials to key positions in Turkey's Savings Deposit Insurance Fund is cited as support for an

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Islamist take-over theory. In 2006, the PM virtually paralyzed financial policy when he tried to appoint an Islamist as head of the Central Bank against President Sezer's firm opposition. (The compromise candidate has demonstrated independent decision-making since his appointment.) To round out the "damning" evidence, critics cite FM Gul's background as a specialist at the Islamic Development Bank in Jeddah from 1983 to 1991 and his reported objections to state scrutiny of Islamic enterprises.

Packing the Court

¶9. (C) Erdogan is also accused of staging a take-over of the judiciary. The AKP pushed through legislation to lower the mandatory retirement age for technocrats, opening the way for Erdogan to name almost 4,000 of 9,000 judges and prosecutors.

In a stand-off with the judiciary, AKP has threatened to refuse to implement high court rulings against the government for obstructing AKP-sponsored legislation. Similar struggles between AKP and President Sezer have caused Sezer to veto over 3,000 AKP appointments and send over 100 AKP-backed laws to the Constitutional Court for review. But for Sezer, Erdogan would already be implementing his "secret" agenda, worried secularists claim. Economic reformers, including the IMF, for their part, would be only too happy to see an AKP-inspired change in the judiciary, which has consistently blocked forward-looking economic reforms.

¶10. (C) Erdogan rebutted the secularists' charges in 2006 by noting that the AKP hadn't been in power long enough to reshape the judiciary. Rigid bureaucratic controls on

promotions and a 15-20 year career path for judges limit the influence of any particular government on the judiciary's orientation. But critics note that Justice Ministry budgetary control over the Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors, which oversees assignments within the judiciary, gives the AKP indirect influence that can have a long-term impact. The president appoints five of the seven council members. The Justice Minister, however, heads the council and controls its funding, which could discourage council members from voting against the Minister's proposed appointees. The most recent charge is that the Minister, by not attending Supreme Council sessions, is preventing 29 judicial positions from being filled.

Small Changes

¶11. (C) AKP's strategy to infiltrate its Islamist agenda into Turkey's secular institutions extends to the municipal level and beyond, according to AKP opponents. The party controls four of Turkey's five largest cities (Ankara, Istanbul, Bursa and Konya). Measures by some AKP mayors to ban alcohol on municipal property, establish women-only parks or equip ferries with prayer rooms are seen as Islamic encroachments on the secular system. Erdogan and other party leaders explained the alcohol restrictions as consistent with the state's obligation to protect children from alcohol, drugs and gambling, rather than a religious proscription. Municipalities are authorized to ban the sale and consumption of alcohol on municipal property and near schools, religious sites and related locations. Of the 62 provincial capitals that have such a ban, 18 have non-AKP mayors. Of the 19 without alcohol bans, 14 have AKP mayors. As another often-cited example of small but telling changes, critics note that employees at the Health Ministry and state-owned Turkish Airlines reported being questioned about their religious beliefs and attitudes toward the Koran, an unprecedented practice.

Internal Balancing Act

¶12. (C) Erdogan has performed a delicate balancing act to maintain unity within the AKP, despite the sometimes conflicting interests of its competing factions. Many party faithful are pious; keeping their allegiance is central to the AKP's hold on power but Erdogan has won them few tangible successes. He has not upheld earlier pledges to lift the ban on headscarves in public buildings, though his strong objections when the European Court of Human Rights upheld the ban in public schools resonated with the party's more devout members. AKP's more conservation faction was disappointed by the failed attempt to criminalize adultery in 2004. Erdogan's attempts to put loyalists into government jobs can also be viewed through the prism of rewarding the party

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faithful.

The Jury Is Out

¶12. (C) Comment. To date, AKP critics can only muster circumstantial evidence of an AKP Islamist agenda. Opposition leaders, some media outlets, the military and extreme nationalists have used this to play up fears that an AKP triumvirate will allow Erdogan to make significant, perhaps irreversible, changes that would undermine Turkey's secular system. Using dramatic ad campaigns and threatening rhetoric, they warn that Turkey may soon have an Islamist president with a head-scarf wearing wife ready to take the country back to the pre-republic "dark ages". President Sezer, military leaders and the MGK chief have all warned Erdogan against unconstitutional moves that might change Turkey's secular identity. The secular establishment's concern that AKP poses a genuine threat to Turkey's secular system is undoubtedly heightened by the realization that AKP's reform agenda threatens the established elite's traditional, top-down control.

¶13. (C) Those not convinced of a nefarious AKP plan contend that more than four years in power have matured the party. Erdogan has had to moderate his message to balance factions within AKP and lessen tensions with secularists threatened by AKP reforms. Much of the party's success stems from its image as being less corrupt ("AK" in Turkish means "clean", a dubious claim for any party here) and more effective than the opposition. Its record to date describes a center-right, conservative party with Islamic roots that has modestly advanced Kemal Ataturk's core principles of westernization and modernization. Some of the changes tied to that process will inevitably transform the traditional power balance and strengthen civilian leaders. To keep the public's trust and minimize tension as Turkish society evolves, AKP, and Erdogan in particular, will need to continue to employ broad-reaching, moderate, balanced rhetoric. End Comment.

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